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## The ‘Thick Journal’ in Russia: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

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*The article analyzes the role of ‘the thick journal’ in the national literary process and, in a wider sense, the spiritual life of the Russian society. For nearly two centuries, the literary periodical press was the focusing mirror of the national literary process, but under the influence of sociocultural circumstances (washing out of the intellectuals as a socially significant structure, falling of authority of the word, development of the Internet, etc.) there was an essential decrease in the reader’s attention to the journal format. At the same time in modern conditions ‘the thick journal’ in Russia as it is reasoned in the paper, seeks to uphold the ideals of culture in accordance with the traditions of national literature.*

*Keywords: literary process, the thick journal, intelligentsia, format, sociology of literature.*

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National literature of any country with common all-human intentions, has its pantheon and its canon. The canon of Russian literature includes such an institution as a literary journal. It is no coincidence that Khlestakov in Gogol’s novel advertised his creative talent not only “being friends with Pushkin” but also by “publishing his works in journals”. It is also notable, vice versa, that the obscurantist Krutitsky from A.N. Ostrovsky’s play was sure, “one cannot learn lessons from journals”. This phenomenon is due to the historical reasons: in the ancient and medieval times, our literature did not know what the journal is. The journal is a formation of the new time, when literature, on the one hand, is open for professionalization, and on the other

hand, it is democratized, i.e. it has gained quite a wide range of potential and actual authors and readers.

The history of the Russian literature of the two last centuries has taught both the public and the writers that everything significant, bright, talented, interesting and open for discussion (maybe with the exception of a number of plays) that has appeared in the Russian literature, has been published, first of all, on the pages of periodical publications. A quarter of a century ago, V. Makanin’s statement made in one of his interviews, sounded axiomatic: “... an author who publishes a book in the Soviet Union without first publishing it in a journal, in fact does not publish anything – neither readers, nor critics will notice

it. This is a long-standing tradition in our country that comes from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But what was the practice of literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has become a selection in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Journals are sieves. Journals are the way to hold literature in the view of the society and to manipulate it at the same time. <...> ... The book that has not passed through a journal, is doomed to death, a nameless death" (Amurskii, 136). Therefore, we can assume that the literary process in Russia took place precisely within the borders of literary periodical publications.

Suddenly, just in front of us, this full-flowing stream has become shallow, and that was not the result of a literary drought. Critics write about the 'sunset' of the journal era in the national literature, in solidarity with sociologists who keep talking about the end of the monopoly of the journal in organizing the literary environment. In particular, B. Dubin stating in the article of 2004 the decrease of the capital journal circulation by 25 times, offered the following analogy: "Imagine that in a city with a one million population only 40 thousand people are left" (Dubin, 172). A decade later, in 2015, at the meeting in Ekaterinburg, S. Chuprinin, the editor in chief of *Znamya* journal reminding that in April the 1001<sup>st</sup> issue of their journal was published (which would seem to be a positive event), said with some bitterness, "nevertheless, circulation fell by 400 times for the first time since I have been the editor-in-chief of this journal! Does it mean that I am the worst of all the previous editors? Or that novels and stories published in the journal are 400 times worse than the previous ones?"

The situation has really changed due to many reasons.

The original title of Ian Sansom's book published in 2015 in Russian with the title "Bumaga. Kniga o khрупkom i vechnom material" (Paper. The Book about a Delicate

and Eternal Material) was "Paper. An Elegy" (Ian Sansom. Paper. An Elegy. Harper Collins Publishers Ltd. 2012). There was, indeed, a media revolution. The letter is now competing with the figure, and the paper text (including the journal) has begun to give way to its virtual copy that is in demand, which, in turn, caused a sharp reduction in the number of individual subscribers among those who continue to be interested in journals. We should remember that the "reading room" of the Internet saves the corpus of the texts that make up the paper issue. It is only the shape of its physical presentation that changes. In other words, the traditional format is primary and the electronic version is its copy. (At the same time, Internet provides an excellent opportunity to create journals in the Web itself including the literary content, but Internet journalism is an independent subject).

Another fact of the many years of literary journals popularity is due to the fact that reading was the most common way to spend your leisure time meaningfully in Russia. On TV, there were two or three programs, the Internet has not yet been invented, and trips abroad were limited by administrative filters. Taking into account the fact that the circulation of books of the most popular authors (including those representing the current literary process) rarely even partially corresponded to the reader's demand for them, it becomes clear why a more democratic form of presenting literary novelties occurred due to journal publications, which, moreover, preceded the publication of these texts in a book format. We should also remember that in Soviet times, journals were, as it is recognized today, very easy to get while they were cheap stimulating individual subscription, and they constantly replenished the fund of not only the city and district, but also the factory, rural and school libraries. In other words, journals compensated the book deficit. If there were more new books with the names of a famous

writer on their covers, journals would have been less popular.

The authority of 'thick' journals in the old days was effectively supported by the authority of the name of its editors. Such editors as N. Nekrasov, A. Tvardovsky, V. Kataev and V. Maksimov shared their fame and talents with the editions they were in charge of. Those who are the heads of journals now, with all due respect, are much more modest figures in the literary world.

Probably, the most important reason that has effected the well-being of journals as well as the social resonance of literature in general, is the depreciation of the word. The country has become overwhelmed with the flood of words, which do not have any reality behind them. This devaluation is stimulated, first of all, by the politicians of all levels, from the district to the state ones. No one is in charge of their words, forecasts and decisions. The 'zero' beginning of the new century has turned into a spiritual vacuum, total marginality, optional nature of what has recently seemed to be principal. In this situation, it is difficult for a journal to be a public tribune, while the society has transformed into the population. Meanwhile, the concept of the society in Russia has been largely formed and maintained due to journal articles and their discussion. It was this way in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It is noteworthy that the thaw period began in the Soviet Union not after Stalin's death, but with journal publications, especially in *Novy mir*: the first in the series of essays of V. Ovechkin "Regional weekdays" (1952, No. 12), several chapters of Tvardovsky's poem "Za dal'iu – vdal'" (1953, No. 6; 1954, No. 3), V. Pomerantsev's article "On sincerity in literature" and N. Zabolotskiy's poem "Thaw" (1953, No. 10), and then – in *Znamya* – and I. Ehrenburg's story with the same 'spring' title (1954, No. 5).

In the conditions of the Soviet single-party system, journals were precisely those institutions that not only structured the literary process, but also the reader's environment, the mindset of the Soviet society. "Public conscience has taken the form of a journal", stated V. Leonovich in his letter to the poet Tvardovsky, and later this thesis was picked up by the critic Ivanova: "*Novy mir* was a kind of politburo of the party of novomirskaia Russia, and the party was so dignified and true." But there were other journal 'parties' with their own aesthetic and ideological preferences. The publishing office led by the author of "Vasily Terkin" and "The House by the Road" following the traditions of realism – the one that in contrast to the socialist realism was defined as 'critical' – focused on the social analysis of the current period and the recent past of Russia. It was focused on liberal values, defending the positions of "socialism with a human face" by its literary worth publications. Its opponent was *Oktyabr* headed by a staunch Stalinist Vs. Kochetov. This journal relied on ideological and aesthetic conservatism, opposing humanistic beliefs of the authors of *Novy mir*, and aesthetically arguing with *Yunost* journal with artistic paradigm, stylistic and genre abandon typical for this journal in the times of V. Kataev. It is appropriate to refer to the thoughts of I. Volgin, "no matter how pathetic it sounds, the fate of the country in the 1960s could have been decided upon in the editorial offices of journals depending on which of the proposed models the government would prefer. It was the time to choose <...> *Novy mir* of Tvardovsky's times is not only the sensory body of literature, but a besieged fortress, and if it resisted or, on the contrary to expectation won, then our way would possibly not bumped into Belovezhskaia Pushcha". In general, we can say that the thaw time was the time of *Novy mir*: the thaw began with its publications and it ended after the liquidation of Tvardovsky's party.

Let us note that it was not political declarations that stimulated perestroika, but journal publications. What Gorbachev's years are known for? For the fact that those who wished to leave the country, but had no chance to do this, finally left it and those who did not, finally read the books they wanted to read for a long period of time which (with few exceptions) had been read all over the world, and now finally had an opportunity to read the authors of the motherland. It would be appropriate to recall on the insightful judgment of M.V. Romanova: what will we do when it all, perestroika and publicity, ends? We will read thick literary journals (Ivanova, 178).

The situation has radically changed in the last twenty years. During these years, if it comes to the current literature, it is usually not due to journal publications, but books. Journal resembles a book. In both cases, saying it in editor's language, there is a code in front of us. A block of pages with text bound together in a cover (in the days of Tvardovsky *Novy Mir* was coming out with a stiff cover). But the content of the pages of a book and a journal is significantly different.

Book can be often waste paper, just a one-time reading product, literary fast food. Journal publication notwithstanding its level is has got a status. It confirms that the text belongs to literature.

Journal, in contrast to almanac, is not a set, but a selection of works. It is not only their quality that is considered, but also their compatibility, consistency and ensemble. "Journal is cooperative work" (Levitskii, 170), both for those who work on it, i.e. editorial staff, and those who publishes in it. Here is another memoir recognition of I. Volgin: when he made his debut in 1962 by his selection of works in *Oktyabr, Noviy Mir* that had been also preparing poems of this young author for publishing, returned the selected material to him: "You cannot serve two masters that are so

different and even have disinclination for each other" (Volgin, 28).

In journal the text is always in the context. The context of this journal, and – increasingly – the context of literature, which is not simply meant (as in the case with the book), but is understood literally, physically, visually. The journal organism is synergistic: there is far more inside it than the summary of its compositions' content. According to the long-standing statement of V. Shklovskii, "journal replaced a library". (Shklovskii, 386) In fact, each issue is a fragment of a micro-library: there is prose, poetry, social and political essays, and criticism. Moreover, criticism in journals is especially important: put in the second half of an issue, criticism largely defines and formulates the publication policy and thus is a full member of the literary process. Criticism, according to the figurative expression of U. Tynianov, "is firmly screwed with the journal" and provides conditions for its navigation in the literary and – increasingly – the spiritual space. The journal format stimulates not only the quality of the text, but also the quality of reading, due to the fact that poetry and prose are under the same cover with criticism.

Therewith, journal unlike book if not read is at least looked through. With books it does not happen always. According to *The Expert* journal (2010, (30-31)), (though not related to our country), people actually read only 30% of books they buy, 70% of books bought in Germany are intended as gifts or to be put on a shelf.

Another special feature of the journal text is that many people read it at the same time. Potential public reaction to publications is more concentrated here. The most significant examples of this are: "Ne khlebom edinyim" (Not by bread alone) by V. Dudintsev in the 1950s, "Odin den' Ivana Denisovicha" (One day of Ivan Denisovich) by A. Solzhenitsyn in the 1960s, "moskovskie povesty" (Moscow stories) by Iu. Trifonov in the

1970s (all of them were published in *Novy mir*) and “Deti Arbata” (Arbat children) by A. Rybakov published in the times of perestroika by *Druzhba narodov*. However, no matter how significant was the reaction to specific publications, it is also important periodicity and regularity of journals publication outlines the heartbeat of literature, its cyclical nature and the calendar rhythm, its continuity. Thus, another quote from L. Levitskii, “the end of the journal epoch is in a sense, a slowdown of literature for some time” (Levitskii, 170).

Journal has also a kind of psychotherapeutic function, which Iu. Trifonov mentioned to L. Zorin: “Our kind need to have our own home, our own journal, our own theater, where we are waited for and where someone believes in us. Without this home one feels lonely and miserable”. As famous authors improve the authority of their publishers, so does journal help new talents to enter the world of literature. Let us remember the roles *Novy mir* played in A. Solzhenitsyn’s life, *Yunost’* in Aksenov’s life, *Znamya* in B. Ryzhiy.

The life of journals, notwithstanding their unhappy present and future prospects, has not stopped. None of journal long-livers has passed away. While the biographies of some regional editions (*Volga*, *Don*, *Sibirskie ogni*) had not escaped time gaps. Unfortunately, not many of ‘thick’ periodicals started in the times of perestroika, are still published: *Arion* and *Vozdukh* (Moscow), *Den’ i noch’* (Krasnoyarsk), *Bel’skie prostory* (Ufa).

The existence of journals has been getting more and more problematic. The problems are not so much related to literature, but mainly to social and everyday life. The washing out of intelligentsia as a socially significant structure is directly correlated with the loss of literary status (and not only) of journals. The fall of the importance of the intellectual status was mostly because of illusory hopes that people will understand something

reasonable, good and eternal. Unfortunately, the population has entirely focused on current, daily, pleasant things. Belinsky and Gogol, as well as those who cherish their commandments, are not taken from the book market today, where Daria Dontsova, Tatiana Ustinova and Larisa Rubalskaia are rule the show: in other words, fifty shades of gray. Individual subscription to literary periodicals has significantly fallen. However, in the Soviet era, with all the money fueling from private subscribers, journals were financed by government publishing houses: *Oktyabr*, *Znamya* and *Yunost* belonged to the publishing house of the Central Committee of the CPSU; *Pravda*, *Novy mir* and *Druzhba narodov* were assigned to the Izvestia publishing house, *Ural* cooperated with the Mid-Ural book publishing house, etc.

Now regional journals are dependent on the governor’s prosperity (E. Rossel, “We need *Ural!*”), and the journal of the central regions after the bourgeois with a human face and a palindromic surname Soros for 16 years – from 1987 to 2003 – has invested about 1 billion US dollars in Russia, including journal subscriptions for libraries of different levels, have been left for self financing, the chances for which in the view of the obvious decline of interest to the printed word, significant increase of prices on paper and printing costs and strong competitiveness from book-publishing monsters like AST, look increasingly bleak.

Speaking about more literary aspects of modern journalistic practice, it is obvious that it’s getting harder for the journals to keep “uncommon expression on their faces”. Of course there is *Nash Sovremennik* trying hard to combine Soviet with orthodox, even at the cost of losing aesthetic consistency. There is *Znamya* journal with its disposition towards genre and stylistic search, though not always leading to literary discoveries. Yet the fights that marked the journal life of the mid-nineteenth or twentieth centuries, or at the

beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are not expected. Of course, individual writers are attracted to a particular editorial house, however, apart from the authors of *Nash Sovremennik*, a writer published in one journal could be printed in another "thick journal" at the same time.

If before almost every journal issue used to have a novel text "to be continued", now huge works are adapted for "journal format" most of the time that can fit in a single issue ("long texts" in the new century come out as books at once or are "replaced" with television series for the public). In an effort to stimulate the reader's interest and to bring non-traditional elements to the conservative journal format, publishers use theming of individual issues: like an issue of short stories of "the size of a palm" (*Oktyabr* 2015, 4) or the issue of the *Znamya* journal (2014, 11) under the motto "Not invented", which united publications of documentary kind. They also make attempts to accommodate "a journal in a journal" ("Beyond the Format" and "Small Stage" in the same journal *Znamya*). There are also promotion actions connected to literature. Here let me refer to the experience of *Ural*, when editorial offices have become a common place for presentations of recent issues, discussion of certain publications, exhibitions of artists.

The condition and prospects of journals are discussed at the national literary level. Thus, during the Year of Literature in Ekaterinburg the first festival-workshop of literary periodicals "Tolstyaky na Urale" was hosted, and discussion of the challenges that had been strated at this meeting continued in the capital at the forum "Journalistic Russia". Books have their own destiny, as well as journals. Literature is now becoming one of the arts losing the leadership, which was confirmed by the language, because in the Russian language there is still a stable expression "Literature and Art", which foreigners assume to be incorrect, just as the journal that

had been the basic format for the current national literature for two centuries, becomes one of the options for the existence of modern literature. Not less and not more.

One of, but which kind? Once A. Blok saw the purpose of poetry to make the selection. Now the main journal aim seems to be selecting: both authors and readers. To continue the selection mentioned by V. Makanin. What for? For the sake of literature. The writer and the reader today can easily do without journal (e.g. recent publications of the novels by V. Pelevin, V. Sorokin, T. Tolstoy, L. Ulitskaia, V. Zalotukha, not to mention D. Rubina or V. Tokareva: they most likely do not need journal anymore, although each of them began their literary biography with journal publications). It is literature that needs journal. Opening a journal, it is not only works that we see, but literature. Journal is the witness that the society needs not only books, good and different, but literature. And literature as L.K. Chukovskaia has reminded "was created for educated people by educated people" (Chukovskaia, 151). The almanac of V. Zhukovsky publised two centuries ago was called *Dlya nemnogikh* (For the chosen one). Here comes the time of literary periodicals that are not for everyone.

For decades, we thought of ourselves as the most reading country in the world. But the dictatorship of the masses turns into domination of mass culture. Life is obviously becoming increasingly uncultured. Is the Year of Literature a joy for Russia of Pushkin, Tolstoy, Chekhov and Bunin? In the contemporary conditions, thick journal should fulfill the function of protecting the culture and developing literature. Serious literature becomes an elitist phenomenon for its creators and readers, a platform for writing and reading elite. And the elite at all times had not required rcirculations with many zeros (in contrast to mass culture).

Once A. Herzen insisted on “the continuity of the tradition”. The “thick” journal tradition should not be forgotten, it should not be given to the verbal market, it should not be sold. It should be continued. Once again, let me remind

Pasternak’s words: “Everything ends that is given an opportunity to end, that is not continued. If it is continued, it will not end”. Therefore, as it was usually stated in journal publication before, it is to be continued.

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## «Толстый журнал» в России: вчера, сегодня, завтра

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В статье рассматривается роль «толстого журнала» в отечественном литературном процессе и – шире – духовной жизни российского общества. Почти два столетия литературная периодика была фокусирующим зеркалом отечественного искусства слова, но под воздействием социокультурных обстоятельств (размывание интеллигенции как общественно значимой структуры, падение авторитета слова как такового, развитие Интернета и пр.) произошло существенное снижение читательского внимания к журнальному формату. Вместе с тем и в современных условиях «толстый журнал» в России, как аргументируется в статье, призван выполнять культуросберегающую миссию, к чему побуждают традиции отечественной литературы.

Ключевые слова: литературный процесс, «толстый журнал», интеллигенция, формат, социология литературы

Научная специальность: 10.00.00 – филологические науки.

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